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AUTHOR Leipzig, John
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ABSTRACT

A study examined whether the core objectives were being met in an ethics course called "Values and Choice" at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. A student survey was developed by faculty representatives from each of the disciplines offering a core course meeting the "Values and Choice" requirement. Subjects were 212 students who completed the 16-item survey. Results for all disciplines indicated that students perceived that Core objectives for the requirement were being met. Findings suggest that students rated the Communication offering (a course called "Communication Ethics") significantly higher than the other three course offerings in terms of its value to them. The "Communication Ethics" course was developed to actively engage students in examining the processes by which morality develops and ethics are shared between and within cultures. (Contains 11 references.) (CR)

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ASSESSING ETHICS INSTRUCTION OFFERED BY VARIOUS UNIVERSITY DISCIPLINES: A CASE FOR INCLUDING COMMUNICATION IN THE MIX

John Leipzig
University of Alaska Fairbanks

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ASSESSING ETHICS INSTRUCTION OFFERED BY VARIOUS UNIVERSITY DISCIPLINES: A CASE FOR INCLUDING COMMUNICATION IN THE MIX

JOHN LEIPZIG, UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA FAIRBANKS

Paper presented to the Ethics in the Professions and Practice Conference University of Montana, Missoula, August 2-6, 1998

In 1993 the University of Alaska offered a new core curriculum which for the first time included an upper division requirement of all students to complete a three-credit course in an area entitled "Values and Choice". The Baccalaureate Experience had 6 core expectations for students one of which was to have all UAF students achieve "a better understanding of one's own values, other value systems and the relationship between value systems and life choices" (UAF Catalog, 1997-1998, p. 23). Initially the only course that satisfied this requirement was an upper division ethics course offered by the Philosophy Department. The university quickly discovered that this requirement, while theoretically sound, was hard to implement in practice especially given the fact that the Philosophy Department had to service their own major and the core with three full time faculty members. In one year the Political Science Department added a course entitled "Values and Choices" which was followed in 1997 by a "Communicating Ethics" course offered by the Communication Department. In Spring 1998 "Environmental Ethics and Actions", offered through the Department of Natural Resources Management was added to the list of approved courses. In the Fall of 1998 a new "Justice Ethics" course will be offered for the first time. While these additions help to relieve the enrollment pressure on the Philosophy Department still this department provides core instruction in ethics to over 50% of UAF students.

Concurrent with the addition of alternative courses to meet the" Values and Choice" requirement was a university requirement, driven by accreditation pressures, to assess the core offerings which would ensure that each of the courses was meeting the goals stated in the Core Curriculum. In the Spring of 1997 a faculty representative from each of the disciplines offering a core course meeting the "Values and Choice" requirement met to discuss commonalties and distinctions between the courses with the goal of developing methods for assessing student outcomes. This working group developed a survey which was piloted in the Spring of 1997 and refined for use in all "Values and Choice" courses offered in the Spring of 1998 as well as available sections in the Summer of 1998. This paper will report on the initial results of student responses as well as make the case that the newer additions meeting the requirement are valuable alternatives to the ethics offering of Philosophy.

The survey results for all disciplines were uniformly positive and indicated that students perceived that stated Core objectives for the requirement are being met. The working group is currently exploring additional assessment methods such as the common assessment of student papers. Of all of the Core offerings, the course in "Communicating Ethics" was rated most positively by students. A number of reasons for this result can be offered such as the class sizes in Communication were lower, all of the courses were taught by the same instructor, and many of the students taking the course

were as interested in communication as they were ethics. A similar positive difference was noted between the Political Science and Natural Resources Management offerings when compared to the Philosophy offering. I both instances potential explanations for the distinctions are similar to those offered in the previous argument for Communication Still, with this said, there are some fundamental differences in the Communication offering which could contribute to positive student perceptions of outcomes. This paper, after discussing the preliminary results of student surveys, will overview the offering in Communication Ethics.

The Survey

The student survey included 16 items which took students approximately ten minutes to complete. Seven of the questions were demographic in nature and asked students why they took the course, student sex, class standing, age, degree, major as well as a question on the class size. These demographic categories helped assess if some of the student differences is the offerings could be explained by these items. The remaining 9 items were intended to assess student perceptions of outcomes as well as to compare "Values and Choice" courses with other core courses which students had completed.

Two hundred and twelve students completed the 1998 survey. The following breakdown by discipline occurred: Philosophy 108 students, Political Science 47 students, Natural Resources Management 30 students and Communication 26 students. 52.8% of the students took the course to fulfill the baccalaureate core requirement for "Values and Choice", 19.3% to meet core humanities requirements, 16.5% to meet major or minor requirements and 9.9% took the course as general elective credit. 70.8% of the students were juniors or seniors while 23.6% were sophomores and 2.8% were freshmen. 50% of the students were female and 49.1% were male. Only .5% are under the age of 18, 35.8% were 18-21, 32.5% were 22-25, 14.2% were 26-30 and 15.1% were over the age of thirty. 41.5% of the students were pursuing a B.S. degree, 34.4% a B.A. degree, 8.0% a B.B.A., 6.6% a B.Ed., 1.4% a B.F.A. and .9% an A.A. degree.

When asked if the size of the course should be changed, 71.7% stated that the course should be kept the same, 18.9% thought the numbers should be decreased while 8.0% felt that the course could be made larger. This finding seems to indicate that class size was not a major determinant of different student evaluations of quality.

Initial Ethics Course Comparisons

On the nine questions that did not deal with demographics, students positively valued each of the disciplinary linked "Values and Choice" options. This indicates that all of the courses are meeting the stated Core goals and are doing so in a manner which students value. The scores on the scales (with the exception of question #8 which is a reflected item whose values must be reversed) ranged from a high of 1.65 on questions #2 and #3 for Communication ("The course has made a considerable degree on difference in my ability to reason critically about ethical issues" and "The course has made a considerable difference in my understanding of the complexity of moral decision-making") to a 2.87 on question #9 for Philosophy ("As compared to other required

Baccalaureate Core courses I have found this course to be more valuable"). Given that the highest value available was a one (Agree Strongly) and the lowest a five (Disagree Strongly) the midpoint would be a score of 3.0 which indicated on average that the 212 students surveyed felt positively about each of the questions asked about their "Values and Choice" courses. This conclusion is useful in furthering the argument about the worth of the upper division requirement in "Values and Choice" offered at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Combining all of the responses to question #9, comparing these courses to other required Core courses, indicated that 48.1% agreed that these courses were more valuable while 15.6% felt that they were not. The 3 to 1 proportion of positive to negative responses is indicative of the high regard with which these courses are held when compared to other required courses in the UAF Core curriculum.

Another general conclusion of note came from question #8 ("I regret having taken the course"). 69.9% of all students disagreed with this statement while only 5.6% agreed. This finding is further evidence that students value the courses that currently are meet this Core requirement.

Individual Course Comparisons

Mean comparisons between the four disciplinary options for meeting the core requirement yielded a number of significant differences with the difference in three questions being most pronounced. In all three cross comparisons question #2 ("The course made a considerable difference in my ability to reason"), question #3 ("The course has made a considerable difference in my understanding of the complexity of moral decision-making") and question #9 ("As compared to other required Baccalaureate Core courses I have found this course to be more valuable") indicated that the Communication offering was rated significantly higher than the other three offerings.

On the ability to reason question the mean rating of the Communication was 1.65, Political Science was 2.12, Natural Resources Management was 2.23 and Philosophy received a mean score of 2.75. The comparison of means yielded significance in the range of $p<.02$ to $p<.000$ respectively. The Political Science and NRM offerings were also rated significantly more positive than the Philosophy offering ($p<.001$ and $p<.02$) but were not significantly different from one another.

On the understanding of complexity question the mean rating for Communication was 1.65, Political Science was 2.04, NRM was 2.23 and Philosophy was 2.53. Again the mean score for Communication was significantly different from the other three offerings ($p<.03$, $p<.003$, and $p<.000$ respectively). In other comparisons on this item only the Political Science offering differed significantly from Philosophy ($p<.01$).

On the final major distinction question dealing with the degree of value placed on this offering versus other required Core courses once again the Communication offering differed significantly from the other three ($p<.03$, $p<.02$, and $p<.000$ respectively). The Communication mean on this item was 1.81 with NRM coming in at 2.31, Political Science at 2.34 and Philosophy at 2.87. Political Science and NRM once again differed significantly from Philosophy ($p<.005$ and $p<.012$).

One must remember that all comparisons occurred on the positive side of the scale and as such significant differences should be seen in this overall light. However,

with this said something different seems to be occurring in the three offerings when compared to Philosophy which is the subject of the remainder of this paper.

Suggested Reasons for Differences in the Degree of Positivity

Further analyses by the workgroup charged with assessment are warranted to fully determine the reasons for the differences in student perceptions between the available courses. One reason that needs particular attention is the relationship between the reason for taking the course and the selection of a particular course. An initial inspection of the data indicated that 60 students took the Philosophy course to meet the Core requirement as compared to 47 who took the course for other reasons. Political Science logged 29 and 18 students in comparison while Communication (10, 15) and NRM (13, 17) each had more students taking the course for other reasons than to fulfill the Core requirement. This distinction could indicate a higher initial desire to take a particular course than was true for the Philosophy and Political Science offerings. However, this explanation still does not account for the differences which exist between Political Science and Philosophy but perhaps the class size distinctions might shed light on this difference in student perceptions. Further analysis is needed before final conclusions can be drawn. Also the need to examine the data to see if there is an instructor effect is also planned. Philosophy, because of its need to cover more sections of the core course and given that 2/3^{rds} of the faculty retired the year, was placed in a situation in which part-time faculty and a visiting faculty member taught most of the "Ethics" sections. While all of the instructors were fully qualified to teach Philosophy, the less positive numbers for Philosophy in this particular data set may well be related to this fact. The fact that students positively valued all of the items for Philosophy should indicate the strength of this particular course irrespective of instructor tenure.

What Does Communication Do Differently?

A second goal of this paper is to discuss the particular offering in Communication that might account for some of the positive reactions by students to this particular course. "Communicating Ethics" was developed to actively engage students in examining the processes by which morality develops and ethics are shared between and within cultures. Ethical systems are distinctly manifested within cultures and through gender and are a particular focus of this course. The mean scores for all of the items related to understanding one's own and others' values ranged from 1.65 to 2.03 which indicated that students in Communication courses felt that they better understood differing value systems as well as their own. Students in "Communicating Ethics" courses were particularly strong in their belief that they better understood the complexity of moral decision making and were better able to reason critically about ethical issues after completing this course. These findings are of particular note since they are direct reflections that the goals of this particular course were being met. Of importance is an examination of the course structure and procedures that may have contributed to increased positive student perceptions.

The course utilizes a case study method in which students are asked to read and actively argue alternative ethical positions which have been reported as current events as well as in provocative essays written in such magazines as *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Nature*. Prior to engaging in these arguments, the students first spend approximately 4 weeks exploring differing conceptions of moral development and feminist and cultural arguments linked to particular developmental conceptions. The students are exposed to two contrasting "systems" for explaining how morality develops. The first is represented by the work of Lawrence Kohlberg that is examined and applied to current events (represented in a particular manner in the national media that introduces students to the rhetorical implications of the message context and structure). As soon as students become comfortable with arguing stages and levels of moral decision making, they are introduced to the concerns with this conception of moral development provided by Karen Gilligan and others. Students are asked to read reviews of Gilligan as well as the prologue to the most recent edition of *In Another Voice*. The course discussion often becomes quite lively as individuals from more collectivist cultures as well as many of the women in class begin relating their own person misgivings with a Kohlbergian conception of justice based ethical systems. The "ethic of care" promoted by Gilligan and others still do not seem sufficient to many students (many male). The contextual nature of such analyses is often problematic to some that are used to more formulaic ways of learning and analysis (we broach issues of differing worldviews and lightly talk of logical positivism and the phenomenology of communication). The students are asked to read two recent *Atlantic Monthly* articles by Edward O. Wilson (Back From Chaos March, 1998 and The Biological Basis of Morality April, 1998). Wilson's style of writing makes some of these more complex issues quite accessible to students at a stage in which they need to ponder the basis of many cultural assumptions that they bring with them to the class. The students are introduced to a different method for analyzing moral decision making which works through the examination of relationships that are important within the contextual nature of a decision being made. In particular, the conception of three moral languages and the questions that must be answered in each stage provides students with an alternative to the standard Kohlbergian moral analysis method. Robert Nash's (1996) book, *Real World Ethics*, provides the reference materials for the moral language approach utilized in the course.

Next students are acquainted with case study writing methods and from this point on they are expected to apply one of the methods of moral analysis and case study method when examining moral issues. One text used in class is particularly useful in introducing students to case study issues in professional contexts is *Applied Professional Ethics* (1994) by Gregory Beaubout and Daryl Wennemann. Later when the class includes different ethical perspectives to their analyses a second text, *Ethics in Human Communication 4th edition* (1996) by Richard Johannesen, is added.

Prior to discussing perspectival issues, students are asked to write a case study report on the moral issues involved in one of two *New Yorker* articles. Ken Auletta's (April 20, 1998) article, In the Company of Women, and Patrick French's (March 16, 1998) article, The New Gandhi, introduces students to a range of gender, cultural and religious issues in terms of ethicality. Importantly within this course the readings are selected by the instructor and often change from year to year as new issues (or better

articles) are explored. While discussing the gender, cultural and/or religious issue students apply one of the moral development perspectives to their case study analysis. This case study is not fully argued in class since the instructor wants to be able to use these first attempts as a baseline to ascertain where students are at in their reading and thinking. This method also provides the instructor with the opportunity to individually assist each student in exploring issues that they may have missed or ignored. After this experience, all arguments that will appear in the student case study will be presented and openly argued with the class. Students are introduced to dialogic principles of ethicality and communication and embed these principles into their discussions, arguments as well as their papers. Depending on the size of the class, 2-4 students are assigned to each article (students are first given the readings and asked to list their preferences). There are 5 different perspectives (Political, Human Nature, Dialogic, Situational, and Religious/Utilitarian/Legal) and each student is responsible for leading the discussion on two articles with each article coming from a different perspective. Within each perspective there are two different articles representing ethical issues that are tied to that perspective (for example, a *New Yorker* article about the recent decision to allow a popular vote on Irish independence in the Political Perspective or an article in *Nature* on stripping and storing human ovarian tissue for later implantation in the Human Nature Perspective). All of the articles are controversial and engage the students in both the reading and the arguing of alternative ethical positions.

All students are required to read the articles prior to the class discussion and if they are not leading the discussion they must record their personal engagement with each article in a graded log. Students responsible for the discussion give their analyses and reasons and are then open to counter arguments. Only after the open discussion period are the students asked to write a graded case study.

What makes the "Communicating Ethics" course successful is providing students with a safe and involving environment which will encourage them to express and test their own and others' moral assumptions. What is most difficult (and admittedly impossible at times) is for the instructor to facilitate that process without venturing into an expression of her/his own ethical stances. However, with this said, students want to know where an instructor stands on ethical issues. If the instructor argues a position on these issues with the goal of understanding versus persuasion he/she can provide a valuable model for discussional engagement for the class. Constantly the instructor has to remind all involved that understanding versus change is the goal of the course and must be vigilant to not encourage discussions which could degenerate into a situation which causes some students to retreat from the discussion out of the fear of attack by others who zealously promote their own self conceptions.

Conclusions

Initial results support the conclusion that the "Communicating Ethics" course is meeting the goals of the "Values and Choice" requirement at the University of Alaska. this course can be a particularly enlivening and rewarding experience for the participants. While the philosophical and theoretical content remains relatively stable in the course, the articles and their attendant ethical issues that are explored are more susceptible to

instructors involved be always on the look for new, relevant and engaging course material.

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